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## THE EARLIEST AMERICAN PUBLICATIONS ON NUMISMATICS A REDISCOVERY

Eric P. Newman

The earliest piece of numismatic literature published in America on American coins has remained virtually unknown. While it was preceded by several publications on American medals the idea of making the detail and history of American coins available for study was slow to develop. In determining what is a numismatic publication as distinguished from what was printed in the course of planning, producing, distributing or circulating coinage, paper money or medals there is a blurred line and opinions may vary as to classification. However, the beginnings of American numismatic literature reveal some curious and unusual printed articles.

Modern numismatic bibliophiles have generally accepted the earliest American publication of a truly numismatic nature as Joseph B. Felt's *An Historical Account of Massachusetts Currency* (Boston 1839). An American numismatic pinnacle was reached soon thereafter by Jacob R. Eckfeldt and William E. DuBois when they wrote *A Manual of Gold and Silver Coins of All Nations*, (Philadelphia 1842).

### American Publications Not Intended as Numismatic Literature

The first American publication concerning coins as collectibles was printed by B. Franklin and D. Hall in 1757 and is a list of 42 Roman coins (referred to as medals) held by the Library Company of Philadelphia. Another inventory of these and many additional numismatic holdings was published by that library in 1807. Included were four Massachusetts shillings, one Massachusetts 6 pence, one Chalmer's 6 pence and five American medals as well as European and Asiatic coins and medals. These listings contained only simple data describing the the pieces.

According to David Humphreys in his 1787 letter to *The American Museum*, American Revolutionary War medals were officially awarded to instill patriotism, to recognize and celebrate heroic achievement, to encourage emulation, and to memorialize people and events. That magazine, in its August 1787 issue, published the letter along with a description of the devices and inscriptions on medals for George Washington, Horatio Gates, and Nathaniel Greene. Other medals were mentioned but not described. Robert Morris, Thomas Jefferson<sup>1</sup> and Benjamin Franklin had worked with Humphreys in the planning and preparation of these awards, and additional examples were arranged for diplomatic gifts and other purposes. In his letter Humphreys also commented that he had not seen any published description of those medals and that there existed a "practice of depositing them in the cabinets of the curious." Thus he recognized the need for numismatic literature on the subject of medals.

The meaning of the emblems and Latin mottoes on the first Continental Currency paper money issue dated May 10, 1775 was not generally understood by the public, and an explanation and translation was first published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of September 20, 1775 and followed in the

*Pennsylvania Magazine* of December 1775. Many other publications of matters concerning American paper money (governmental and bank notes) during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century related to its value, legal tender status, depreciation, counterfeiting, redemption and other economic features, not involving the study of it.<sup>2</sup> A historic summary of these topics was published by William M. Gouge in *Paper Money and Banking in the United States* (Philadelphia 1833, etc.) and is not intended to be numismatic.

The writings covering the planning of coinage for the United States written by Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Robert Beale Bordley, Thomas Paine and others covered the establishment of coinage standards for the United States and were not of numismatic intent.

In 1789 Bordley<sup>3</sup> specifically named Virginia halfpence, Nova Constellatio coppers, English halfpence circulating in America (both genuine and counterfeit), and other foreign copper money used in America, but only as a basis for planning copper coinage for the United States. His publication also included specie coinage suggestions and was followed by a supplement in 1790.

The early publication in America of exchange calculation matters in books, almanacs, pamphlets, tables and newspapers as well as arithmetical and accountancy instruction books were for commercial purposes and only incidentally provide some numismatic information. The U.S. Mint Reports were operational data and not for numismatic purposes, but naturally contain much pertinent information for numismatic studies.

### **Beginnings of American Numismatic Articles**

Pierre Eugene du Simitiere (1737-1784) had prepared an inventory of much of his collection of coins, paper money, and medals which were displayed in a museum in Philadelphia in 1782-1784. Being an artist he also had partially completed a numismatic manuscript describing and drawing in superb detail examples of American coins. Unfortunately his work was never completed or published.<sup>4</sup>

On June 9, 1818 at a New York Historical Society meeting James Mease, M.D. (1771-1846), a Philadelphia member, gave a detailed description of 17 medals struck to commemorate events in North America up to 1804. It also included the persons and classes of persons to whom War of 1812 medals were awarded. No coins were mentioned. This study was published in *The Collections of the New York Historical Society*, Vol. III (New York 1821) pp. 387-404 and contained extensive footnotes describing some of the events giving rise to distribution of the medals. This imprint appears to be the first truly numismatic article published in America. It was revised and shortened by Mease and republished in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. IV (Cambridge 1834), pp. 297-308. In these two versions the word "face" was sometimes selected to designate the obverse, but the available word Obverse was never used. The words "reverse," "device," "legend" and "exergue" were consistently used with proper technical application.

The use of the word "Face" in a description of a coin or medal created confusion before the word "Obverse" was fully accepted. "Face" could mean the head side or it could mean either side. In an entry on September 2, 1787 in the manuscript diary of Reverend William Bentley<sup>5</sup> of Salem, Massachusetts, he undertakes to describe Vermont, New York and Connecticut coppers as well as counterfeit British halfpence. He first uses the word "face" as referring to each side of the coin. Then he compares the face on Connecticut coppers to the face of the "Georges" on the counterfeit British coppers, applying the word reverse when describing the side with the date. Finally he states that "the New York & Connecticut coin face opposite ways." We must face up to Bentley's having failed to make an about face in order to save face by using the word "obverse."

A subsequent American numismatic publication was a listing of 38 American medals prepared by Joshua F. Fisher (1808-1873), also a Philadelphian, and was included in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. VI (Boston 1837), pp. 286-293.<sup>6</sup> It was a description of 14 medals dedicated to George Washington, five medals to Benjamin Franklin, one medal to Thomas Jefferson, one medal to Dr. Benjamin Rush, three medals of the American Revolution and 14 American colonial medals. One of these medals was the coin-size Pitt "halfpenny" token struck to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act and dated 1766. The Washington medal commemorating the Evacuation of Boston by the British, described in detail in Mease as Item #4, is specifically included by reference in Fisher as his Item #2. With that exception there are no medals previously listed in Mease which are included or referred to in Fisher, even though his title was "Description of American Medals." The 1837 Fisher publication uses the word "obverse" consistently and does not use the word "face." The other technical numismatic terms used by Mease are consistently retained in Fisher's presentation.

In 1838 there appeared another numismatic article by Mease entitled "Old American Coins." It is described by its author as consisting of some American coins issued before the establishment of the Constitutional government of the United States. It is the first numismatic article on American coins published in America and is included in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. VII (Boston 1838) pp. 282-283. It describes nine copper coins, namely the Bar Cent, a 1722 Rosa Americana, a 1787 Fugio cent, a 1788 Massachusetts cent, a Condor token, a 1785 Nova Constellatio copper, a New Jersey copper, a 1787 Connecticut copper and a 1773 Virginia halfpenny. The status of that article and its content seem so important and previously unknown that its entire text is separately included as part of this commentary.

The description of the Bar Cent in Mease's listing is extremely probative as that coin's only prior known mention appears to be in the December 19, 1785 *New Jersey Gazette* (Trenton).

The Conder token is described as having such a poorly cut date that it cannot be read. Its legends and description show that its date is 1794 (not 1784) and it was subsequently classified as Dalton & Hamer, Cork #14.

The 1722 Rosa Americana is commented upon as being a similar type to a coin found in the ground while digging the foundation for St. Phillips Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 1835. Another Rosa Americana coin found in April 1835 in a garden in Washington, Pennsylvania near Brooke County, West Virginia (then Virginia) is also mentioned. Both of these finds were reported in newspapers which future researchers may be able to locate.

The New Jersey copper is given the non-existent date of 1785, the understandable error being due to the unclear die cutting of the last numeral on the date on many of the 1786 New Jersey pieces.

The most spectacular comment concerns the copper coinage of Connecticut. Mease states "This is the old farthing of our boyhood." Mease was born in 1771 and was 14 years of age when the first Connecticut coppers were minted and 16 years of age when the plethora of 1787 coppers were struck. He lived in Philadelphia. The major collapse of the circulating value of Connecticut and most other circulating coppers occurred in the middle of 1789, whereupon the exchange rate of coppers in New York money of account was set by both the City of New York and the City of Albany at 48 to the shilling or one farthing New York money of account for each copper. Almost one year later on June 7, 1790 a committee report to the General Assembly of New Jersey confirms a similar value for Connecticut and counterfeit British coppers by stating that they can be bought at 45 to the shilling for overstriking with New Jersey dies. It also states that such coppers pass from 48 to 36 for a shilling, if at all.<sup>7</sup> New Jersey money of account was valued at the same rate as that of Pennsylvania.

Mease's use of the word "farthing" is the only known use applied to any coppers then in circulation in the United States including the Connecticut coppers. It is applied by one who actually circulated Connecticut coppers. Mease lived in Philadelphia and even though Pennsylvania money of account was 7 shillings 6 pence to the Spanish dollar in contrast with New York money of account at 8 shillings to the Spanish dollar, he indicated that such coppers were accepted for a farthing in Pennsylvania money of account. This confirms the actuality of an exchange rate for coppers conforming generally to the 1789 New York municipality recommendations. It is amusing to realize that American or British counterfeits of British halfpence were circulating in America at that time apparently as farthings in money of account, as there were no actual British farthings (genuine or counterfeit) then in circulation in America according to the New York report of March 5, 1787.<sup>8</sup>

### Comparison with Foreign Publications on American Money

Early numismatic publications in England such as Pepys, Leake, Haym (the Pembroke Collection), Snelling, Ruding and others include some early American coins issued prior to the American Revolution, but nothing numismatic prior to 1838 seems to have been published in Europe covering American coinage after American independence, except perhaps the description of the 1776 Continental Currency pewter coinage by Richard Watson in *Chemical Essays* (London 1786), Vol. IV, pp. 135-137.

There are various European exchange books which included American coins minted after independence,<sup>9</sup> but these books cannot be construed to be numismatic in nature, and copper coin was customarily excluded from them.

### The Rediscovery

How were the Mease and Fisher items located when they do not seem to be indexed or included in present numismatic bibliographies or libraries? The answer is the detailed information included in the catalog of one of George F. Kolbe's numismatic book auctions. Lot 450 in his December 8, 1991 catalogue was *Norton's Literary Letter* №3 (New York 1859) containing the first published address given at the American Numismatic Society. The discourse by William S. Fredrick Mayers, who died in China in 1878, was entitled "The Literature of American Numismatics" and was presented to members of the American Numismatic Society on November 19, 1858 in New York during the first year of that society's existence. *The American Numismatic Society 1858-1958* by Howard L. Adelson records the event but not the publication of Mayers' talk.

The content of "The Literature of American Numismatics" features the great progress of American numismatic investigation and states that in 1843 knowledge of American numismatics was confined to a very few individuals in the United States in comparison with a greater number in England. Mayers mentions that American coin collectors were then being referred to as "monomaniacs." The discourse then notes the deep interest of Mease and Fisher in American numismatics and the publication of their work by the societies of which they were members. Specific citations for their articles as published in 1821, 1834, 1837 and 1838 are given. There was no reference to Humphrey's 1787 article on American medals printed in *The American Museum*, but Bordley's 1789 pamphlet was cited.

### Acknowledgement

Being unaware of the Mease and Fisher material, the mention of it in Kolbe's description of the Mayers' item piqued my curiosity. A visit to a historical library opened a new vista for me. I had merely rediscovered what Mayers already had carefully expostulated 134 years ago. I thank George F. Kolbe for creating that opportunity. I also am grateful to Thomas D. Serfass, Michael J. Hodder, Phil Lapsansky and Francis D. Campbell for their suggestions and cooperation. If someone else since 1859 has pointed out or cited the Mease and Fisher numismatic literary contributions, I will be glad to apologize.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1961) Vol 16, pp. 53-79, xxxv-xlii, pl. I-XXIX.

<sup>2</sup> Eric P. Newman, *The Early Paper Money of America*, third edition, (Iola, 1990)

<sup>3</sup> *On Monies, Coins, Weights, and Measures* (Philadelphia, 1789)

<sup>4</sup> Joel J. Orosz, *The Eagle that is Forgotten*, (Wolfeboro, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.*, (Gloucester Mass, 1962) Vol I, pp. 73-74.

<sup>6</sup> The name of Joshua Francis Fisher was erroneously referred to in the article as J. S. Fisher. He was not from Baltimore as stated in Norton's Literary Letter N<sup>o</sup>3 of 1859, but from Philadelphia.

<sup>7</sup> "Notes and Proceedings of the Fourteenth General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, (New Brunswick, 1790), pp. 50-51; Michael J. Hodder, "New Jersey Reverse J, a Biennial Die," *American Journal of Numismatics*, Second Series, I (New York, 1989), p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> *The American Museum* (Philadelphia), October 1787, Vol. II, N<sup>o</sup>4, pp. 403-404; Sylvester S. Crosby, *The Early Coins of America* (Boston 1875), pp. 290-292.

<sup>9</sup> For example: Pierre Fredric Bonneville, *Traite des Monnaies D'or et D'argent* (Paris, 1806).

[The following account of some American coins, issued before the establishment of the present government, by some of the States, was furnished by Doctor JAMES MEASE, of Philadelphia].

No. 1. This coin is larger than a half cent. On one side it has thirteen ribs or bars which run parallel to, and are equi-distant from each other. On the other side are the letters U. S. A. the S. being of larger size, running across the other two letters. It has no date nor any other inscription.

No. 2. On one side a head surrounded by "Georgius. Dei. Gratia. Rex." On the other side is a rose and the following inscription, "Rosā. Americana. Utile. Dulci. 1722.

No. 3. On one side a chain of thirteen circular links running around the face of the coin. In the centre a circle, having upon it the words "We are one," and around these words, "United States." On the other side there is a sun at meridian height, looking down upon a dial, beneath which appear these words, "Mind your business." The word "Fugio," and the date 1787 also appear on the same side of the coin.

No. 4. On one side the American Eagle, having on its breast a shield, with the word CENT upon it. Around the face of the Coin is "MASSACHUSETTS 1788." On the other side is an Indian at full length with his bow and arrow, and the word COMMONWEALTH.

No. 5. On one side a sheaf of wheat, and the words "PEACE AND PLENTY;" on the other, a full length portrait of Fame blowing her trumpet, and these words, "FOR THE CONVENIENCE OF THE PUBLIC." There is a date upon it, but the third figure is so badly done, as to leave a doubt whether it is 1784, or some earlier period.

No. 6. On one side a Sun, with *thirteen* stars around it, and the words "NOVA CONSTELLATIO;" on the other, the letters U. S. surrounded by a vignette, and the words "LIBERTAS ET JUSTITIA 1785."

No. 7. Is the Jersey Half-penny, having on one side a shield, surrounded by the words "E. PLURIBUS UNUM;" on the other a Horse's head and a plough, with the words "NOVA CÆSAREA, 1785."

No. 8. On one side a head and the word "AUCTORI CONNEX," on the other a female figure very much in the form of a gingerbread child, holding what may be an olive branch in one hand, and a bow and arrow in the other, with the date below it of 1787. This is the old farthing of our boyhood.

No. 9. Has on one side a head, and the words "Georgius III Rex." On the opposite side is a shield cut into quarters, containing respectively the coats of arms of England, Scotland, Ireland and Virginia, surmounted with a crown, and surrounded with "Virginia, 1773." A coin similar to this was a year or two ago dug up in a garden, and with the description given of it, there was published the following history.

The following historical facts are here distinctly referred to. During the usurpation of Cromwell, the colony of Virginia refused to acknowledge his authority, and declared itself independent. Shortly after, finding that Cromwell threatened to send a fleet and army to reduce Virginia to subjection, and fearing the ability of this feeble state to withstand this force, she sent over in a small ship, a messenger to Charles II., then an exile, at Breda, in Flanders. Charles accepted the invitation to come over, and be king of Virginia, and was on the eve of embarking, when he was recalled to the throne of England. As soon as he was restored to the crown of England, in gratitude for the loyalty of Virginia, he caused her coat of arms to be quartered with those of England, Scotland, and Ireland, as an independent member of the Empire. The above coin is clearly confirmatory of these facts. Hence the origin of the phrase "Old Dominion," frequently applied to Virginia.

The coin No. 2, resembles very much, one lately found in Charleston, and of which the following account was published in the Charleston papers:

**CURIOUS COIN.**—The workmen in preparing the foundation of St. Phillips Church, have found a Coin, the age of which is now 113 years, with the head of George the First. The inscription around which is—Georgius, D. G. Mag. Bri. Fra. Et. Hib. Rex. On the opposite side is a Rose—the inscription, Rosa, Americana, 1722, Utile Dulci. It probably is a coin of one of the Old Thirteen Colonies. Another of these coins was found in April, 1835, in digging a garden in Washington; Pensis, bordering on Brook County, Virginia.—J. M.